

Communication for All:

Sharing WACC's Principles

WACC believes that communication plays a crucial role in building peace, security and a sense of identity as well as in promoting justice, mutual accountability and transparency. Communication, WACC believes, contributes to the common good. This conviction has led WACC to articulate seven guiding principles:

- **Communication is a spiritual exercise**
- **Communication builds and shapes community**
- **Communication enhances participation**
- **Communication promotes freedom and demands accountability**
- **Communication celebrates cultural diversity**
- **Communication builds connectedness**
- **Communication affirms justice and challenges injustice**

Introduction

In 1984, Hans W. Florin, then General Secretary of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), guided the development of a statement of WACC's core identity intended to shape its life and work. Two years later, WACC's directors adopted the *Christian Principles of Communication* (1986), affirming that communication creates community, is participatory, liberates people, defends and promotes human cultures in all their rich diversity and speaks prophetically to power. Fr. Michael Traber was the key drafter of those principles.

It was WACC's hope that the *Christian Principles of Communication* would challenge its members "to disassociate themselves from power structures which keep the poor in a position of subservience" and to promote "genuine reconciliation by means of which the dignity of all people can be reaffirmed." The aim also was to encourage members to contribute, as people of faith, to the emerging debates on communication rights and communication ethics, as well as to advocate for truth and justice in a world where information and communication systems often sustained an unjust status quo.

A quarter of a century later, the world is both different and unchanged. Political, economic, social, and cultural structures have been transformed by globalization and technological innovation. Yet urgent questions of justice and equality remain to be addressed all over the world, not least in those countries suffering repression, conflict, and poverty.

To that end, WACC has revised and updated its principles to reflect contemporary realities. WACC affirms that communication is a spiritual exercise, builds and shapes community, enhances participation, promotes freedom and demands accountability, celebrates cultural diversity, builds connectedness, affirms justice and challenges injustice. In a spirit of openness to dialogue, WACC offers this document to all people of good will.

Communication is a spiritual exercise

WACC understands that communication is a function of transcendence. There is a sacredness to the creation of meaning in common, in which communication reflects the spiritual values at the heart of human identity. Creating meaning in common is a journey that Christians share with people of other faiths and none.

WACC finds in the person of Jesus a model for communication. In Jesus, God became one with humankind and experienced the marvellous intensity of human relationships. In Jesus, God became part of human history and affirmed the essential value of community and culture. Jesus lived out compassion for the poor, the sick and the excluded, and he challenged the powerful to serve those in need. In Jesus, God experienced the brokenness and pain produced by injustice. In Jesus, God lifted up the hope of healing and fulfilment, of abundant life for all.

The Christian tradition has no monopoly on such values; they are common to all faiths. By means of this document, WACC seeks to encourage inter-faith study and dialogue.

Communication builds and shapes community

Communication is the invisible bond that holds communities together. The Latin verb *communicare* means to share, make common, turn into communal property. Communities shaped by *communicatio* share their spiritual and material resources, share ethical objectives with regard to their common life and the relationships they seek to build. This was the experience of the early Christian Church where “All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need” (Acts 2: 44-45).

The life of a community is enriched by open, honest and transparent dialogue about decisions and events affecting the lives of its members. This applies equally to a neighbourhood or village, a city, a religious community or a community of nations. Relationships within a community are created and strengthened by face-to-face conversation, community media run by and for its members, and social media that enable genuine participation in political, social and cultural questions relating to the common good.

Rather than uniting people and helping them to discern common interests, the mass media often isolate or divide. Where there are no obstacles or constraints, alternative and social media can help revitalise communities and rekindle relationships since they represent ways of communicating that are open and inclusive, rather than one-way and exclusive.

Communities depend on communication to dismantle barriers that prevent them from claiming rights and justice for all – particularly barriers of race, gender, class, nation, power and wealth.

Genuine communication calls for mutual accountability practised in community, building trust that, in turn, strengthens community life and can lead to communion. True communion is facilitated when people join together to affirm that diversity, acceptance of and commitment to one another enrich them and make them stronger.

Communication enhances participation

Participatory communication is open to dialogue, the fluid exchange of ideas and the transformation that emerges as a result. Inclusive communication does not seek simply to persuade people to accept pre-conceived ideas. Instead, true conversation changes all participants; ideas become a communal work-in-progress, enlightened and enlightening. Participation also leads to transparency and mutual accountability as people come to understand their participation in the context of the well-being of their communities.

When communication is inclusive and invites participation, it makes worldviews and collective experiences richer and more vivid. More images, thoughts and points-of-view are added to the public sphere.

Social media platforms, for example, have dramatically broadened media participation, although they are not free of the logic of the marketplace and are subject to the influence of powerful ideological interests. For this reason, it is vital that participants in social media work maintain autonomy, diversity, and transparency. Every story deserves an opportunity to be recounted, questioned, rebutted and challenged.

Stereotypes are challenged as people use emerging technologies to exercise their right to communicate in the public space, uploading words and images instantly as events unfold. The danger of stereotypes is not only that they are untrue, but that they presuppose that one story is the only story, that one image becomes a token for all.

Only if communication is participatory, can it empower individuals and communities, challenge authoritarian political, economic and cultural structures and help to build a more just and peaceful world.

Communication promotes freedom and demands accountability

In many communities, the incorporation of emerging communication technologies into daily life multiplies voices while creating spaces where the silenced and invisibilized may address grievances. Communities use these technologies, together with more traditional media, as powerful tools with which they can demand accountability and celebrate their particular identities. In both rural and urban communities, information and communication technologies are being used for keeping in touch with friends and family, creative self-expression, commerce, accessing global culture, networking and advocacy.

On the other hand, media and technology conglomerates, often in partnership with governments, practice surveillance and exercise unprecedented levels of control over citizens. Furthermore, interconnected monopolies control news, opinion and entertainment, often in the pursuit of narrow ideological agendas.

The existence of information and communication technologies, on its own, does nothing to guarantee that the media serve truth and the common good, nor that everyone will be assured access to media platforms. Left to their own devices, media monopolies, allied with politicians, often engage in deception and manipulation to consolidate and preserve their own power. Such actions are an affront to human dignity and undermine personal freedom.

The Christian tradition affirms that God invests all of humankind with freedom and dignity, and that God stands especially with the oppressed and marginalized, working through history for their liberation. God desires that all people be enabled to learn from and interpret their own reality.

In today's world, communication must be lifted up as a fundamental human right and communicators called to practice an ethics of freedom and accountability. Freedom of expression must be respected and community groups assured access to technology and to media platforms. Educational curricula must include media literacy programs. This is especially important in times of rapid social and technological change when traditional cultures need to develop constructive strategies for engaging external cultural influences. Together, such principles assure that a diversity of voices and images remain before the public and that the public can develop healthy criteria for discerning how those voices and images may contribute to the common good.

Communication celebrates cultural diversity

Culture is the totality of what a group of people thinks, how it behaves and what it produces that is communicated to future generations. Culture is what unites people as human beings, but it also divides them into different communities. In today's world, it is increasingly important to understand the similarities and differences between cultures. By appreciating similarities, people better understand their common humanity. By appreciating differences, people are able to affirm their self-worth in a global community that often trivializes notions of cultural identity.

Communication creates the symbolic environment in which identity, diversity and people's essential humanity co-exist. Genuine communication values people's dignity as human beings and their communities' cultures, especially in matters of language and faith. In this respect, and despite the homogeneity spawned by globalization, many people are rediscovering and reclaiming their cultural identity. This is vital when cultural memory, language, religion, gender, age, ethnicity or race are denigrated or denied by members of other cultural groups.

Since meaning is created and shared through communication, it can sow understanding or misunderstanding, harmony or discord. Those who wish to deny justice turn to communication to disempower. In contrast, those who wish to challenge injustice turn to communication to empower. Celebrating and defending cultures becomes a way of strengthening a community's sense of its inherent worth and identity.

Communicators have a responsibility to create images and meaning respectful of the values and traditions that lie at the heart of other people's lives. It falls to communicators to avoid stereotypes, to strengthen inter-cultural and inter-religious understandings and to promote societies whose cultures live in peace together, affirming what each holds in common as well as what separates them. "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility" (Ephesians 2:14).

Communication builds connectedness

Human beings are created to be in relationship with God, with each other and with the whole of creation. The whole created order bears God's image. For this reason,

the well-being of all creation is a function of the well-being of each of its parts.

Today's globalized world is mired in multiple conflicts, ranging from ethnic and religious tensions, to disparities between rich and poor, to the challenges of climate justice. Contemporary media narratives, rooted in the conviction that polemic attracts bigger audiences, tend to exacerbate rather than assuage these tensions.

In today's world, developing communication skills that flow from an understanding of what all humans have in common – their inter-connectedness – is urgent. Building connectedness through communication affirms the uniqueness of each person and each community: their faces, stories and experiences. In this way “the other” is not merely a set of data, but a being who is valued and who needs to be understood. This implies giving “others” the space to be themselves where they can feel free to say what they think.

Connectedness emphasizes human dignity, potential and creativity, as well as human finitude and vulnerability. It persuades us to seek new and vital forms of dialogue and action that transcend the boundaries of religion and ideology and that empower persons and communities.

Communication that builds connectedness means establishing relationships of loving care with each other and the wider creation, acknowledging and taking responsibility for humanity's place within creation's interdependent whole.

Communication affirms justice and challenges injustice

In today's media world, a few powerful corporations and individuals decide whose voices are heard and what images are seen by the public, allowing them to shape policy, form public opinion and move peoples toward war or peace. In this context, some media workers, in both the news and entertainment media, have dared to speak truth to power, lifting up the concerns of the excluded and interpreting with insight how power flows in today's world.

Communicators who discern the ebb and flow of political, economic and cultural power in a particular time and place can use their insights to denounce the abuses of the powerful and to defend the dignity of widows and orphans, outcasts and strangers. Communicators can also announce the good news of how God is working in our midst to bend human history toward justice and peace. Such discernment takes on lasting meaning only when words are accompanied by action. To challenge injustice is to challenge the “principalities and powers” and may carry a high price.

Communication that affirms justice and challenges injustice serves truth and illuminates falsehood, since deception and half-truths threaten the common good. It also stimulates critical awareness of the realities constructed by the media, helping people to identify special interests and to differentiate that which is ephemeral and trivial from that which is lasting and of value.

Denouncing the abuses of the powerful is necessary not because communicators are without fault, but because they hope to create community in a world where others seek to divide. They promote participation and freedom where others seek to enslave and to silence, and they support and defend human dignity where others seek to destroy it. Communicators address power because those who seek it always, in

every time and place, risk being seduced by power itself. When that happens, power becomes an agent of death. If communicators are to serve the God of Life, they must affirm justice and struggle against injustice.

Communication Rights, Communication for All

In light of the above principles, and believing that communication embodies respect for the dignity, integrity, equality and freedom of all human beings and their communities, WACC recognizes communication rights as inherent in all other human rights.

Communication rights claim spaces and resources in the public sphere for everyone to be able to engage in transparent, informed and democratic debate. They claim unfettered access to the information and knowledge essential to democracy, empowerment, responsible citizenship and mutual accountability. They claim political, social and cultural environments that encourage the free exchange of a diversity of creative ideas, knowledge and cultural products. Finally, communication rights insist on the need to ensure a diversity of cultural identities that together enhance and enrich the common good.

Communication for All: Sharing WACC's Principles affirms the centrality of communication – including mass, community and social media – in strengthening human dignity and in promoting democratic values and social justice. In particular, the principle of “communication for all” restores voice and visibility to vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in a spirit of genuine solidarity.